DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 400 121 PS 024 710

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TITLE Adolescent Adjustment in Stepfamilies: Structural or Process Problem?
SPONS AGENCY Ministry of Education, Quebec (Canada).; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Ottawa (Ontario).
PUB DATE Aug 96
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (14th, Quebec City, Quebec, Canada, August 12-16, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Adolescents; Anxiety; Family Characteristics; *Family Environment; *Family Structure; Foreign Countries; Personal Autonomy; Sibling Relationship; *Stepfamily; Suicide; Well Being
IDENTIFIERS Bronfenbrenner (Urie); Canada; Joint Custody

ABSTRACT

Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, this study tested the hypothesis that family processes contribute more to adolescent adjustment than does family structure. Subjects for the study were 234 adolescents between 12 and 16 years old living in a stepfamily on a regular basis. This sample is a sub-sample of a representative provincial survey (n=3,205) with adolescents from intact families (n=2,048), joint custodies (n=111), and others not considered in future analysis (n=22) were also a part of the survey. A mailed questionnaire available in French and English was completed by the adolescents. Findings indicated that the mean anxiety score was higher than other adjustment components and that 18.3 percent of the adolescents had made a suicide attempt. Girls had a lower personal well-being score and a higher anxiety score than did boys. Younger adolescents showed fewer behavior problems than did older adolescents. Adolescents in stepfamilies estimated quite positively the quality of their family environment. They estimated the quality of their sibling relationship less positively than the quality of the relationship with their parents. Younger adolescents had lower decisional autonomy than did older adolescents. The quality of the family environment was related to adolescents' adjustment; however, there was no relationship between adolescents' decisional autonomy and adjustment. The quality of the relationship with the each parent individually was associated with adjustment, while the quality of the relationship with siblings was associated with personal well-being. Adolescents from intact families showed the lowest adjustment difficulties, with adolescents in joint custody rating second, adolescents in stepfamilies rating third, and adolescents living in single families, fourth. Family climate predicted 27 percent of the variance in adolescent adjustment. (KDFB)

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ED 400 121

ADOLESCENT ADJUSTMENT IN STEPFAMILIES: STRUCTURAL OR PROCESS PROBLEM?

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to documentate the issue of adolescents' adjustment who live in a stepfamily. More specifically, we test the hypothesis which states that family processes contribute more than family structure (intact, joint custody, single and step —family) to the youth adjustment. Our sample consisted of 143 girls and 89 boys between 12-16 years old living in a stepfamily on a regular basis. This sample is a sub-sample of a representative provincial survey (N= 3,205) (Enquête «Ados, familles et milieu de vie», Cloutier et al., 1994). Data was collected by means of a self-report questionnaire available in French and English completed by the adolescent. Specific analyses were conducted on social background, quality of the family environment and adjustment. The preliminary results confirm the importance of family processes on the adjustment of adolescents.

RESEARCH TOPIC

There is no unanimity about the effects on adolescents of the reconstitution of the family and this lack of consensus seems to be reinforced by the diversity of theoretical perspectives adopted by researchers. However, the more recent results about the issue of adjustment following break-up and family reorganization strengthen the idea of the fundamental contribution of processes on the adjustement of the individuals rather than the structural characteristics of their family (Acock & Demo, 1994). The present study is related to an ecological conception of human development by using the Process-Person-Context (PPC) developed by Bronfenbrenner (1996æ). While this model includes the notions of personal and environmental characteristics, as well as time, it emphasizes the proximal processes, qualified as «engines of development». To test this model, we developed different hypotheses, two of which directly address the process called «quality of the family environment»:

$H_1 1$: Adjustment of adolescents living in a stepfamily will be associated with the quality of the family environment. The better the quality of this environment, the higher the adjustment of adolescents will be.

$H_1 2$: When the quality of the family environment is considered, adolescents' family structure will not be associated with their adjustment.

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[1]The author is granted a National Welfare Fellowship for doctoral studies from Health Canada and another from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Claire Chamberland, Ph. D., chaired this research.

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METHODS

SUBJECTS FOR VERIFICATION OF HYPOTHESIS $H_1 1$

SAMPLE: 143 girls and 89 boys (2 did not indicate their gender); (234 adolescents)
AGE: 12 to 16 (X = 14,4 years old; S. D. = 1,2)
FAMILY STRUCTURE : 172 stepfather families (73,5 %)
62 stepmother families (26,5 %)
PARENT'S OCCUPATION:
Father's occupation: 73,3 % work full-time
11,5 % work part-time
Mother's occupation: 52,7 % work full-time
17,1 % work part-time
(No information is available about the family's income level)

SUBJECTS FOR VERIFICATION OF HYPOTHESIS $H_1 2$

SAMPLE: 1,563 girls and 1,200 boys (2,775 adolescents)
AGE: 11 to 16 (X = 14,3 years old; S. D. = 1,3)
FAMILY STRUCTURE: 2,048 intact families (73,9 %)
356 single families (12,9 %)
111 joint custodies (4,0 %)
234 stepfamilies (8,4 %)
22 others (not considered in future analysis)
PARENT'S OCCUPATION
Father's occupation: 81,8 % work full-time
9,3 % work part-time
Mother's occupation: 48,2 % work full-time
22,9 % work part-time

These samples are sub-samples of a representative provincial survey (N= 3,205) (Enquête «Ados, familles et milieu de vie», Cloutier et al., 1994).

DATA COLLECTION
Self-report questionnaire completed by the adolescent
6,121 questionnaires were mailed
Reply rate is 52,6 %

INSTRUMENT
Adjustment (dependent variable):
°personal well-being
°anxiety problems
°behavior problems
°well-being with friends
°difficulties in school environment.

Quality of the family environment (independent variable):
°family climate
°decisional autonomy
°quality of the relationship with the father
°quality of the relationship with the mother
°quality of the sibling's relationship

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

A- ADJUSTMENT (table 1)

- **In general, adolescents' adjustment difficulties in stepfamilies are weak, regardless of the factor examined.**

However, the mean score of anxiety is somewhat higher than the mean score of the other factors. One must note that 18,3 % of the adolescents of this sample have made a suicidal attempt.

The degree of boys' adjustment is different from the girls' considering two factors: the girls have a degree of personal well-being lower than the boys ($t(230)=-2,44$; $p \leq 0,05$); they also indicate a higher degree of anxiety problems ($t(230)=-3,54$; $p \leq 0,001$).

The younger adolescents (12 to 14,5 years old) show fewer behavior problems than the older (14,5 years old and over) ($t(234)=-1,95$; $p \leq 0,05$).

TABLE 1
Mean scores of adjustment difficulties by gender and age of respondents

Adjustment	All	Boys	Girls	Younger	Older
Factor 1: Personal well-being					
N	232	88	142	103	125
range (**5-20**)[1]	5 - 17	5 - 17	5 - 17	5 - 16	5 - 17
mean	**9,55**	**9,04**	**9,82**	**9,61**	**9,37**
standard deviation	2,55	2,65	2,43	2,54	2,48
		t = -2,44*		t = 0,91+	
Factor 2: Anxiety					
N	232	87	143	102	126
range (**5-20**)	5 - 20	5 - 17	5 - 20	5 - 19	5 - 19
mean	**10,26**	**9,22**	**10,80**	**9,78**	**10,47**
standard deviation	3,35	3,92	3,37	3,23	3,24
		t = -3,54***		t = -1,55+	
Factor 3: Behavior problems					
N	228	84	142	102	122
range (**0-4**)	0 - 4	0 - 3	0 - 4	0 - 4	0 - 3
mean	**0,44**	**0,45**	**0,42**	**0,39**	**0,47**
standard deviation	0,74	0,70	0,76	0,82	0,66
		t = 0,73+		t = -1,95*	
Factor 4: Well-being with friends					
N	232	89	141	104	124
range (**3-12**)	3 - 11	3 - 10	3 - 11	3 - 11	3 - 10
mean	**5,22**	**5,21**	**5,22**	**5,27**	**5,15**
standard deviation	1,81	1,86	1,79	1,86	1,74
		t = -0,09+		t = 0,40+	
Factor 5: Difficulties in school environment					
N	232	87	143	104	124
range (**5-20**)	5 - 15	5 - 13,4	5 - 15	5 - 14,4	5 - 15
mean	**7,86**	**8,06**	**7,73**	**7,62**	**7,97**
standard deviation	2,41	2,33	2,47	2,41	2,36
		t = 1,34+		t = -1,54+	

* $p \leq 0,05$; *** $p \leq 0,001$; + $p > 0,05$;

[1] In this study, a lower score indicates a lower level of difficulties and vice-versa.

B- QUALITY OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT (table 2)

- **Generally, the adolescents in stepfamilies estimate quite positively the quality of their family environment.**

The adolescents estimate the quality of theirs siblings' relationship less positively than the quality of their relationship with their father or mother.

There is no difference in the evaluation made by boys or girls concerning the dimensions of the quality of the family environment.

The younger adolescents stated lower decisional autonomy in the family than the older ones ($t(210)=-4,12$; $p \leq 0,0001$). This is the only difference found between these two age groups concerning the quality of the family environment.

TABLE 2
Distribution of respondents by gender, age and mean scores for each dimension of the quality of family environment

Quality of family environment	All	Boys	Girls	Younger	Older
Dimension 1: Family climate					
N	234	89	143	104	126
range (**18-72**)	19 - 59	19,0 - 59,1	20 - 56	21 - 54	19 - 59
mean	**33,92**	**33,50**	**33,99**	**33,34**	**34,03**
standard deviation	8,63	9,31	8,10	7,96	8,97
		t = -0,78+		t = -0,29+	
Dimension 2: Decisional autonomy					
N	212	81	130	91	119
range (**8-40**)	19 - 40	19 - 40	21 - 40	21 - 40	19 - 40
mean	**33,75**	**33,75**	**33,8**	**32,67**	**34,72**
standard deviation	4,22	4,76	3,79	4,10	3,98
		t = 0,44+		t = -4,12****	
Dimension 3: Quality of relationship with the father					
N	210	80	128	94	112
range (**17-68**)	17 - 60	17 - 60	17 - 58	17 - 58	17 - 60
mean	**32,36**	**32,76**	**31,93**	**31,58**	**32,54**
standard deviation	11,17	11,50	10,99	11,02	11,23
		t = 0,57+		t = -0,72+	
Dimension 4: Quality of relationship with the mother					
N	227	85	141	101	123
range (**17-68**)	17 - 65	17 - 65	17 - 57	17 - 55	17 - 65
mean	**27,23**	**26,36**	**27,67**	**26,37**	**27,89**
standard deviation	9,35	9,01	9,53	8,97	9,68
		t = -0,99+		t = -1,37+	
Dimension 5: Quality of relationship with siblings					
N	188	71	116	85	100
range (**17-68**)	17 - 61	21 - 60	17 - 61	17 - 60	20 - 61
mean	**40,11**	**40,64**	**39,66**	**41,04**	**39,27**
standard deviation	9,97	10,39	9,66	10,00	9,79
		t = 0,43+		t = 1,17+	

**** $p \leq 0{,}0001$; + $p > 0{,}05$;

ADJUSTMENT AND QUALITY OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

$H_1$1: Adjustment of adolescents living in a stepfamily will be associated with the quality of the family environment. The better the quality of this environment, the higher the adjustment of adolescents will be.

1) Family climate (table 3)

The family climate is statistically associated with all factors evaluating the degree of adolescents' adjustment. The degree of relationship ranks from slight ($r = 0,15$) to moderate ($r = 0,48$).

TABLE 3
Correlations between adjustment of adolescents from stepfamilies and the family climate

$H_0$1-5: The family climate is not correlated with the:	***r***	**N**
1- degree of personal well-being	0,48****	232
2- degree of anxiety problems	0,29****	232
3- number of behavior problems	0,26****	228
4- degree of well-being with friends	0,15*	232
5- degree of difficulties in school environment	0,29****	232
* $p \leq 0,05$ **** $p \leq 0,0001$		

2) Decisional autonomy and adjustment (table 4)

There is no significative relationship between adolescents' decisional autonomy and any other factors evaluating the degree of adolescents' adjustment ($p > 0,05$). We have to accept the null hypothesis.

TABLE 4
Correlations between adjustment of adolescents from stepfamilies and decisional autonomy

$H_0$6-10: Decisional autonomy is not associated with:	*r*	N.
6- degree of personal well-being	-0,06+	210
7- degree of anxiety problems	-0,03+	210
8- number of behavior problems	0,07+	206
9- degree of well-being with friends	-0,04+	210
10- degree of difficulties in school environment	-0,00+	210
+ $p > 0,05$		

3) Quality of relationship with father (table 5)
The quality of the relationship with the father is associated with all factors evaluating the degree of adolescents' adjustment. The degree of relationship ranks from low ($r = 0,21$) to moderate ($r = 0,42$).

TABLE 5
Correlations between adjustment of adolescents from stepfamilies and the quality of relationship with the father

$H_0$11-15: The quality of relationship with the father is not associated with:	*r*	N
11- degree of personal well-being	0,42****	209
12- degree of anxiety problems	0,35****	208
13- number of behavior problems	0,29****	205
14- degree of well-being with friends	0,21*	209
15- degree of difficulties in school environment	0,32****	208
* $p \leq 0,05$ **** $p \leq 0,0001$		

4) Quality of relationship with the mother (table 6)
The quality of relationship with the mother is associated with four of the five factors evaluating the degree of adolescents' adjustment. The degree of relationship ranks from slight ($r = 0,14$) to low ($r = 0,39$). This variable does not seem associated with the well-being of the adolescent with his (her) friends.

TABLE 6
Correlations between adjustment of adolescents from stepfamilies and the quality of relationship with the mother

$H_0$16-20:The quality of relationship with the mother is not associated with:	*r*	N
16- degree of personal well-being	0,39***	225
17- degree of anxiety problems	0,26***	225
18- number of behavior problems	0,17*	221
19- degree of well-being with friends	0,12+	225
20- degree of difficulties in school environment	0,14*	225
* $p \leq 0,05$ **** $p \leq 0,0001$ + $p > 0,05$		

5) Quality of relationship with siblings (table 7)
The quality of relationship with siblings is associated with one of the five factors evaluating the degree of adolescents' adjustment, that is his (her) personal well-being. The degree of relationship is low (r = 0,27). No other significant association has been observed.

TABLE 7
Correlations between adjustment of adolescents from stepfamilies and the quality of relationship with sibling

$H_0$21-25: The quality of relationship with sibling is not associated with:	*r*	N.
21- degree of personal well-being	0,27****	187
22- degree of anxiety problems	-0,03+	187
23- number of behavior problems	0,05+	185
24- degree of well-being with friends	0,00+	186
25- degree of difficulties in school environment	0,05+	186
**** $p \leq 0,0001$ + $p > 0,05$		

ADJUSTMENT, FAMILY STRUCTURE AND QUALITY OF THE FAMILY ENVIRONMENT

$H_1 2$: When the quality of the family environment is considered, adolescents' family structure will not be associated with their adjustment.

• The degree of adolescents' adjustment difficulties shows statistical differences depending on family structure (Table 8).

The adolescents living in intact family show the lower degree of adjustment difficulties. The adolescents living in joint custody rate second and the adolescents living in stepfamilies rate third. The adolescents living in single families have the higher degree of adjustment difficulties.

TABLE 8
Analysis of variance of adolescents' adjustment

Variable	Adjusted means	*F*
Family structure[a]		18,52****
nuclear family	30,89[b]	
joint custody	32,36	
single family	33,39	
stepfamily	33,24	

**** $p \leq 0{,}0001$
a $F\ (3{,}2636) = 18{,}52;\ p \leq 0{,}0001$
b: lower scores indicate lower level of difficulties

- **The significant association between family structure and adolescents' adjustment disappears when family climate is considered** (At this time, statistical reasons force us to limit the quality of family environment to this only dimension.) **(table 9).**

The introduction of the covariable "family climate" explains the quarter (26,94 %) of the variance observed in the adolescents's adjustment.

TABLE 9
Analysis of covariance of adolescents' adjustment

Variable	Adjusted means	*F*
Family climate[a]		896,11****
Family structure[b]		1,72+
nuclear family	31,33	
joint custody	31,41	
single family	31,99	
stepfamily	32,01	

**** $p \leq 0{,}0001$ + $p > 0{,}05$
[a] (F (1,2632) = 896.11; $p \leq 0{,}0001$)
[b] (F (3,2636) = 1,72; $p > 0{,}05$)

CONCLUSION

- **Family climate, quality of relationship with the father and the mother are factors strongly influencing adolescents' adjustment.**

These variables are particulary associated with the personal well-being of the adolescents as well as with their anxiety problems and, at a lower level, with their difficulties in school environment.

- **Family structure is associated with adolescents' adjustment. However, this significative association disappears when family climate is considered.**

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